SŪRAH 43

Al-Zukhruf

(Gold)

Prologue

This *sūrah* presents a detailed picture of what the Islamic message faced of problems, arguments and objections. It also shows how the Qur'ān dealt with these and their effects on people, establishing at the same time its own truth in place of old, false, ignorant superstitions and values that had taken hold of people's minds at the time. In fact, some people, everywhere, continue to hold elements of these as valid.

Followers of pagan beliefs used to claim that the cattle God has created for the benefit of mankind are divided between God and their own alleged deities: "*Out of the produce and the cattle He has created, they assign a portion to God, saying: 'This is for God' – or so they pretend – 'and this is for the partners we associate [with Him]'. Whatever they assign to their partners never reaches God, but that which is assigned to God does reach their partners.*" (6: 136) In fact, they believed in many legends and superstitions concerning cattle, and these were all the result of deviant practices. In this way, they claimed that they were forbidden to ride some animals, while others were considered unlawful to eat: "*They say: 'Such cattle and crops are forbidden. None may eat of them save those whom we permit' – so they falsely claim. Other cattle they declare to be forbidden to burden their backs; and there are cattle over which they do not pronounce God's name, inventing [in all this] a lie against Him.*" (6: 138)

This *sūrah* discusses such deviant beliefs putting forward the original truth and demonstrating that cattle are God's creatures, representing an aspect of life that is closely related to the creation of the heavens and the earth. God has made cattle subservient to man so that people can express their gratitude and give thanks to Him for such a blessing. They must neither attribute false partners to Him nor enact for themselves legislation that is at variance with what pleases God, when they recognize Him as the Creator. How absurd that they discard the natural result of this truth, which they acknowledge, allowing superstition to get the better of them: "*Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.*" (Verses 9–14)

Ignorant paganism used to claim that angels were God's daughters. Although they hated daughters being born to themselves, they nonetheless attributed daughters to God and worshipped these instead of Him. They alleged that they worshipped them by God's will. Had He willed otherwise, they would not have worshipped them. Again, this was nothing but a legend arising from deviant beliefs.

The *sūrah* uses the unbelievers' own logic as well as the logic of sound human nature to refute this baseless legend: "*Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. [Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. They say: 'Had it been the will of the*

Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' (Verses 15–22)

When they were told that they were only worshipping statues, idols and trees, and that everyone who worships anything other than God will be thrown into hell together with the object of their worship, they twisted this clear statement making it a subject of dispute. They referred to Jesus, pointing out that his followers worshipped him. So would he be thrown into hell? They also argued that the idols represented angels who were God's daughters. Therefore, they postulated, "we are better worshipping them than the Christians who worship Jesus, a mere human being." The *sūrah* exposes such twisted logic, absolving Jesus of what the Christians perpetrated after his time, since he did not sanction anything of the sort: "*Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel.*" (Verses 57–59)

They also claimed that they followed Abraham's faith and, as such, were best guided, yet all the while they were immersed in pagan ignorance. The *sūrah* outlines the true nature of Abraham's faith, based on God's absolute oneness. This principle continued and will continue among Abraham's descendants. Muḥammad, God's messenger, came to them with the same principle, but they received him with other than what Abraham's offspring should give: "*Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God]. I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.'*" (Verses 26–30)

They could not understand God's wisdom in choosing His messenger. Their earthly values, the basis of the status they assigned to people, contributed to their unwillingness to accept him. The *sūrah*

reports what they said in this respect, presenting the true values that should be upheld in comparison to their trivial ones: "*They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?' Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.*" (Verses 31–35)

The *sūrah* then recounts an episode from Moses' life history, one that reflects Pharaoh's similarly false values. This account demonstrates how both these values and Pharaoh himself were unworthy. It tells us of the fate that awaits him and all those with similar attitudes: "*We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them, yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word. Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?' Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil. When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*" (Verses 46–56)

I

Ignorance Based on Superstition

Al-Zukhruf (Gold)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

By the Book that makes things clear! (2)

وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ ﴿٢﴾

We have made the Qur'ān a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand. (3)

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٣﴾

It originates in the source of revelation kept with Us; it is indeed sublime, full of wisdom. (4)

وَإِنَّهُ فِي أُمِّ الْكِتَابِ لَدَيْنَا لَعَلِيٌّ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٤﴾

Should We ignore you and take away this reminder from you because you are people who transgress beyond bounds? (5)

أَفَنَضْرِبُ عَنكُمُ الذِّكْرَ صَفْحًا أَن كُنتُمْ قَوْمًا مُّسْرِفِينَ ﴿٥﴾

وَكَمْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن نَّبِيٍّ فِي الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٦﴾

Many a prophet did We send to people of olden times; (6)

وَمَا يَأْتِيهِم مِّن نَّبِيٍّ إِلَّا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ ﴿٧﴾

but they mocked at each prophet who came to them. (7)

فَأَهْلَكْنَا أَشَدَّ مِنْهُم بَطْشًا وَمَضَىٰ مَثَلُ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٨﴾

We destroyed them even though they were mightier than these. Thus their example has gone down in history. (8)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ لَيَقُولُنَّ خَلَقَهُنَّ الْعَزِيزُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' (9)

الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَرْضَ مَهْدًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ فِيهَا سُبُلًا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. (10)

وَالَّذِي نَزَّلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً بِقَدَرٍ فَأَنشَرْنَا بِهِ بَلْدَةً مَّيْتًا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ تُخْرَجُونَ ﴿١١﴾

And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. (11)

وَالَّذِي خَلَقَ الْأَزْوَاجَ كُلَّهَا وَجَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنَ الْفُلْكِ وَالْأَنْعَامِ مَا تَرْكَبُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, (12)

لِتَسْتَوُۥا۟ عَلَىٰ ظُهُورِهِۦ ثُمَّ تَذْكُرُوا۟ نِعْمَةَ
رَبِّكُمْ إِذَا ٱسْتَوَيْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ وَتَقُولُوا۟
سُبْحَٰنَ ٱلَّذِى سَخَّرَ لَنَا هَٰذَا وَمَا
كُنَّا لَهُۥ مُقْرِنِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. (13)

وَإِنَّآ إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا لَمُنقَلِبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

To our Lord we shall most certainly return.' (14)

وَجَعَلُوا۟ لَهُۥ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ جُزْءًا ۚ إِنَّ
ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ لَكَفُورٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٥﴾

Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. (15)

أَمِ ٱتَّخَذَ مِمَّا يَخْلُقُ بَنَاتٍ
وَأَصْفَىٰكُم بِٱلْبَنِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? (16)

وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُم بِمَا ضَرَبَ
لِلرَّحْمَٰنِ مَثَلًا ظَلَّ وَجْهُهُۥ مُسْوَدًّا
وَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. (17)

أَوَمَن يُنَشَّؤُا۟ فِى ٱلْحِلْيَةِ وَهُوَ فِى
ٱلْخِصَامِ غَيْرُ مُبِينٍ ﴿١٨﴾

[Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? (18)

وَجَعَلُوا۟ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ
عِبَٰدُ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ إِنَٰثًا ۚ أَشَهِدُوا۟
خَلْقَهُمْ ۚ سَتُكْتَبُ شَهَٰدَتُهُمْ
وَيُسْـَٔلُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. (19)

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْ شَآءَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ مَا عَبَدْنَٰهُم ۗ
مَّا لَهُم بِذَٰلِكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ ۖ إِنْ هُمْ
إِلَّا يَخْرُصُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. (20)

أَمْ ءَاتَيْنَٰهُمْ كِتَٰبًا مِّن قَبْلِهِۦ فَهُم
بِهِۦ مُسْتَمْسِكُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? (21)

بَلْ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا وَجَدْنَآ ءَابَآءَنَا عَلَىٰٓ أُمَّةٍ
وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم مُّهْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' (22)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ مَآ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ فِى
قَرْيَةٍ مِّن نَّذِيرٍ إِلَّا قَالَ مُتْرَفُوهَآ
إِنَّا وَجَدْنَآ ءَابَآءَنَا عَلَىٰٓ أُمَّةٍ وَإِنَّا
عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم مُّقْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' (23)

قَٰلَ أَوَلَوْ جِئْتُكُمْ بِأَهْدَىٰ مِمَّا وَجَدتُّمْ عَلَيْهِ ءَابَآءَكُمْ ۖ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا بِمَآ أُرْسِلْتُم بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' (24)

فَٱنتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ ۖ فَٱنظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end. (25)

An Address to the Mind

The *sūrah* begins with the two separate letters *Ḥā* and *Mīm* which are then followed by an oath by the book that makes things clear. Both the letters and the book are of the same nature: in its spoken form, the book is of the same type as the letters. Just like all letters in human language, the two letters, or sounds, are of God's signs: it is He who created people and gave them the sounds of their languages. When such letters are mentioned, they carry more than a single meaning with reference to the Qur'ān.

God states this oath by the two letters and the clear book so as to confirm the purpose of making this Qur'ān in the form it was made when revealed to the Arabs: "*We have made the Qur'ān a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand.*" (Verse 3) The purpose, then, is that they should understand it as it is composed in their own tongue. The Qur'ān is God's revelation which He has made, in its spoken form, Arabic as He chose the Arabs to be the bearers of His message. We explained this purpose partly in commenting on the previous *sūrah*. Moreover, God made His choice on the basis of His knowledge that the Arabs were suitable message-bearers and that their language could best express it. God knows whom to entrust with His message.

He then defines what position He has assigned for the Qur'ān with Him and its value in His overall plan for the universe: "*It originates in*

the source of revelation kept with Us; it is indeed sublime, full of wisdom." (Verse 4) We will only in passing refer to the literal meaning of the phrase *Umm al-Kitāb*, translated here as 'the source of revelation'. Does it refer to the 'imperishable tablet'[1] mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān, or to God's eternal knowledge? Both are the same in the sense that they do not have a specific meaning within our sphere of knowledge. Yet the verse transmits a definite impression that the Qur'ān has an especially high value in God's overall knowledge and planning. This is enough for us. The Qur'ān is '*sublime*', and '*full of wisdom*'. These two qualities give it a specific rationality, and indeed it is so! It is as if the Qur'ān has a soul of its own, with special features and qualities, that respond to the souls of those who interact with it. With its sublime position and wisdom, it provides guidance to humanity, leading it according to its own nature and qualities, imparting to its rational understanding and to its life values, concepts and facts that are also sublime and bear wisdom.

When this fact has been established it makes the people who speak the language in which the Qur'ān has been revealed appreciate the great gift and blessing God has given them. It shows them the extent of their transgression when they turn away from it in disdain. It is they who deserve to be treated with contempt. Therefore, they are told that they may well be ignored because of their transgression: "*Should We ignore you and take away this reminder from you because you are people who transgress beyond bounds?*" (Verse 5)

It is indeed most remarkable that God, in His glory and sublimity, should care for such people, revealing to them a book in their own tongue, telling them about what they feel, explaining the inner aspects of their lives, showing them the path delineated by His guidance, relating to them accounts of earlier communities and reminding them of God's law that was in effect during ancient times. Yet they continue to ignore His guidance, turning away from it. For God to say that they will be deprived of His care and be ignored for their transgression sounds dreadful.

1. Verse 22 of *Sūrah* 85.

In addition to this threat, they are reminded of God's law that applied to earlier communities that denied the prophets sent to them: "*Many a prophet did We send to people of olden times; but they mocked at each prophet who came to them. We destroyed them even though they were mightier than these. Thus their example has gone down in history.*" (Verses 6–8) What can they expect when God has already destroyed people that were much mightier than they because of their derision of the messengers sent to them?

The Almighty Creator

Amazingly, although the Arabs recognized that God was the Creator of the heavens and the earth, they did not follow this through to its logical conclusion, declaring His oneness and address all worship to Him. On the contrary, they attributed partners to Him, assigning to these some of the cattle He has created. They also alleged that the angels were God's daughters whom they worshipped in the form of idols. The Qur'ān reports their acknowledgement of God's creation, puts before them the logic of human nature which they discard, and outlines the behaviour they should adopt in response to His blessings, particularly ships and cattle. It then describes what they claim about the angels:

> *Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.* (Verses 9–14)

The Arabs had a faith, which we can imagine as consisting of remnants of the original pure faith of Abraham, that had lost its original shining colours, intermingled with legends. What remained was something that human nature could not deny, namely that the universe has a Creator who is God: the universe could not have existed without a Creator and the Creator could only be God. Yet, the Arabs did not take this natural truth to its logical conclusion; they simply stopped at the bare fact: "*Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.'*" (Verse 9)

It is obvious that they did not verbalize God's two attributes: the Almighty and the All-Knowing. They acknowledged that it was God who created the universe, but they did not know God according to His attributes detailed in the Islamic faith. These are positive attributes that produce a clear effect on people's lives and the life of the universe. They admitted that God created them and the universe, but they also alleged that He had partners because they did not know God's attributes that would have made the very concept of partnership with Him appear absurd. The Qur'ān tells them now that the Creator they acknowledge is the One who is Almighty and who knows all.

The *sūrah* takes them another step forward in outlining God's attributes and the favours He has given them: "*It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way.*" (Verse 10) Smoothing out the earth is a fact understood, in one way or another, by everyone. The people who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān would have seen the earth smooth under their feet when they walked, ready for plants to grow. It is smoothed out generally for life to grow. However, we realize this today in a more profound way, taking into account what we have learnt about the nature of the earth and its history. Future generations will understand this fact in an even greater way; human knowledge will continue to expand and discover new facts that have so far remained unknown.

Today, we understand that smoothing out the earth so as to enable the human race to survive on it and find ways and paths to ensure life progresses is a complex multi-faceted process. In fact, this planet has gone through a number of different stages that have allowed its surface

to change from a hard rocky one to plant-supporting soil. Water has been formed from oxygen and hydrogen. Its rotation speed has slowed down to ensure that it has moderate temperatures throughout its day and so as to allow objects to remain stable on its surface. Moreover, a proper measure of gravity has been placed on it to ensure that its atmosphere remains sufficiently stable to support life. Without such an atmosphere life cannot be sustained, as is the case on other planets with a gravity too weak to ensure stability. Moreover, the earth's gravity has been made equal to movement and this equilibrium has protected objects and living things from being blown away, while at the same time allowing man and other living things to move on the surface of the earth. Had gravity increased above this sustainable level, all objects and living creatures would have been stuck to the earth and their movements would have become very hard or even impossible. Furthermore, air pressure would have increased so as to bind them firmly to the earth or crush them against it, just as we sometimes crush flies and mosquitoes with a strike that does not bring our hands into contact with them but rather increases the air pressure around them. By contrast, should air pressure decrease, our veins and breasts may burst.

The smoothing of the earth to make it life supporting also refers to the fact that the Almighty, All-Knowing Creator has brought about numerous balances which together facilitate human life on earth. Had any of these been disturbed, life would have become very difficult, even impossible. We have already mentioned some of these. We may, however, refer to the fact that the great amount of water that covers much of the earth's surface purges its atmosphere of much of the poisonous gases that result from the infinite number of interactions that take place all the time. Thus, its atmosphere remains life supporting. Plants also ensure that a proper balance is maintained between the oxygen living creatures breathe in and the oxygen breathed out during the process of assimilation plants perform. Unless this balance is maintained, all living things would have suffocated in a very short period of time.

Indeed the significance of the Qur'ānic statement, '*It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you*,' grows

wider every day. Every new addition to its significance testifies to both God's might and knowledge. We see God's able hand wherever we look and however far our imagination roams. It tells man that his life is not the result of blind coincidence nor has he been abandoned. Indeed, God's hand defines man's every step before, during and after his life on earth.

"*So that you can find your way.*" (Verse 10) Reflection on what the universe contains and its natural laws inevitably leads the human mind to recognition of its Creator who established such accurate and perfectly harmonious systems.

Blessings of Every Type

The *sūrah* then looks a step further at the process of life and the emergence of living creatures: "*And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead.*" (Verse 11) Water comes down from the skies, as every person sees and knows, but most people are not moved by this remarkable phenomenon because of over familiarity. Muḥammad, God's messenger, (peace be upon him), however, held a different attitude. He looked at the drops of rain with love and welcoming delight, knowing that they came from God; in other words, his heart recognized God's handiwork in these drops. Every heart that is aware of its bond with God and the laws of nature He has set in operation should adopt this attitude. Every raindrop is the result of these laws of nature which operate under God's eye and control. That rain originates from the vapour that rises from the earth and cools down in the atmosphere in no way diminishes the implication of these facts. Who has brought the earth into being, placed water on it, subjected it to heat, made water naturally evaporate and vapour rise and condense? Who has given the universe its other characteristics which give the condensing vapour an electrical charge so that when clouds gather, their electric charges cause rain to fall? Besides, what is electricity? What are these other characteristics that produce the combined effect of rain falling down? As we learn more about nature, however, our knowledge casts a heavy weight over our understanding. We no longer

appreciate the messages given by universal phenomena; we no longer allow these messages to refine our feelings and responses.

"*And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure.*" (Verse 11) It is given in the right quantity, neither too much so as to flood large areas of land, nor too little to leave the land barren. Man has come to recognize the importance of maintaining this fine balance for the continuity of life. "*With it We raise dead land to life.*" Life on earth flourishes where water is plentiful. It is from water that every living thing originates. "*And thus you will be raised from the dead.*" (Verse 11) The One who originated life in the first place will bring it back again. It is He who started life in a land that was dead, and He will raise all back to life on the Day of Resurrection. Nothing is difficult for Him.

We learn from this *sūrah* that the Arab unbelievers used to assign a portion of their cattle to God and another portion to other beings. God, however, created cattle as one of the favours He bestows on man: people ride cattle as they ride on ships and they should appreciate His blessings and give thanks: "*And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.*" (Verses 12–14)

Making things in pairs is a rule of life, as indicated in this verse. All living things are created in pairs; even the first living cell carries masculine and feminine characteristics. In fact, this rule perhaps applies to the universe in its entirety, if we consider its basic unit to be the atom which consists of a negative electron and a positive proton, as all research in physics has so far indicated. Be that as it may, this duality is apparent throughout life. It is God who has created all pairs, human and non-human.

Moreover, it is He who has "*provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride.*" (Verse 12) This is to remind man that God has placed him in charge of the earth, putting at his disposal its considerable and varied power and potential. It also invites man to show gratitude for God's choice and blessings, reminds him of the One who grants

blessings every time such a blessing is enjoyed. Such expressions of gratitude for God's blessings is sure to keep our hearts alive to their bond with God at every turn in life: "*So that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves.*" (Verse 13) We certainly cannot match His blessings. All that we can do is to be truly grateful and give due thanks for all that He has favoured us with. We should realize that we will eventually return to God after our term in charge of the earth comes to its end. He will then requite us for what we have done in life when we enjoyed His favours and what He placed at our service: "*To our Lord we shall most certainly return.*" (Verse 14) Such are the refined manners people should adopt towards God who has granted us countless favours and blessings. Yet we tend to forget Him even when we are enjoying His favours. Hence, this gentle reminder.

These Islamic manners closely relate to the cultivation of the human conscience and people's education. This is not a mere ritual or empty phrase we say when mounting cattle or riding on ships and other means of transport. It is a deliberate action that aims to alert our feelings so that we are fully aware of the bond between God and His creatures. Furthermore, His blessings are granted to us freely; we cannot repay God in any way for any of His countless blessings. Hence, we should always remain in awe of Him, thinking of the day when we will meet Him and submit our account of what we did in life. Thus we should always remain conscious of God, aware that He is watching over us.

An Absurd Superstition

The *sūrah* then refers to the absurd legend that makes deities of angels, alleging that they are God's daughters when they are no more than a different type of creature:

> *Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily*

attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. [Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end. (Verses 15–25)

The *sūrah* addresses every aspect of this superstition, leaving no loophole unclosed. Throughout, the *sūrah* uses the unbelievers' own logic and draws on their own life situations. It places before them the fate of earlier communities that adopted a similar stand to theirs, making almost identical allegations. It begins by highlighting the absurdity of this superstition and what it means of blatant rejection of the truth: "*Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude.*" (Verse 15) The angels are God's servants. To allege that they are God's offspring means that they are not His servants, but instead have a special relationship with Him. Since they are God's servants, to give them any special relation to their Creator is meaningless. All God's creatures are His servants. Such a claim, thus, brands man as a clear unbeliever: "*Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude.*" (Verse 15)

Using their own logic and standards, the *sūrah* ridicules their allegation that the angels are female and then their claim that they are

God's offspring: "*Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons?*" (Verse 16) If God were to take offspring for Himself, why would He choose females and give the males to them? This is nothing less than absurd and especially when they are so distressed when a daughter is born to them. "*If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom.*" (Verse 17)

What sort of manners are these that make them attribute to God what would fill them with gloom? Indeed, they would be so distressed about parenting a daughter that they could not even face speaking about it. In their environment, it was only brave men who could fight hard in battle that were looked upon with esteem. How come, then, that they assign to God offspring of the type which only cares about jewellery and fine things, unable to refute an argument or fight a case? "*[Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument?*" (Verse 18) Here we see how the *sūrah* uses their own logic, making them ashamed of attributing to God what they themselves hate to father. Should they not, if at all, have attributed to Him what scores highly in their own estimation?

The *sūrah* then refutes another of their absurd superstitions. They alleged that the angels were female. On what basis do they make such a claim? "*They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it.*" (Verse 19) Were they present when the angels were created so as to know that they were female? Had they seen their creation, they would have had reliable evidence. They certainly cannot claim to have been present at the time, yet still they make this ridiculous assertion. Therefore, they will be made responsible for claiming what they have no evidence to prove: "*Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it.*" (Verse 19)

The unbelievers provide further argument to justify their absurdities, but once again the *sūrah* exposes how flawed their statements are: "*They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly*

lying." (Verse 20) When they are faced with irrefutable argument based on solid evidence, they justify their action by claiming that it is God's will. They allege that God accepts their worship of angels. Had He not been pleased with this, He would have prevented them from such worship! How devious! It is true that everything in the universe occurs by God's will. Yet it is also God's will that man has been given the ability to choose for himself which way to follow: true guidance or error. God has also required man to choose His guidance and follow it, telling man that this is the choice He will be pleased with. He is not pleased when man chooses error and disbelief, even though He has enabled him to do so.

When they attribute their own choice to God's will, this is nothing less than wild conjecture. They cannot be certain that God wants them to worship the angels. How can they achieve such certainty? "*Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying.*" (Verse 20) They simply indulge in guesswork and delusion. "*Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast?*" (Verse 21) Do they have such a book as a basis for their claims, giving them clear evidence in support of their worship?

Thus we see how the *sūrah* closes in on them, refuting every argument they make, and clearly indicating that faith cannot be based on guesswork or unsupported claims. Faith can only be based on a revealed book to which people should adhere.

At this point, the *sūrah* exposes the reality on which they rely when holding to their absurd superstition that makes them offer false worship: "*No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.'*" (Verse 22) This is a ludicrous and baseless argument. It shows them to be content to follow their ancestors without thinking about or looking into the basis of their actions. Thus, they are no more than a herd of cattle driven to where it does not know. They are totally unaware of their destination or whether they are following the road leading to it.

Being a message that seeks to free the human mind of all shackles, Islam rejects such abject following in the footsteps of ancestors. Every action should be determined on the basis of deliberate thinking and conscious choice.

At the end of this passage, the unbelievers are shown the fates of earlier communities that argued in the same vein and blindly followed their forefathers' footsteps, rejecting the truth clearly presented to them by God's messengers: "*And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end.*" (Verses 23–25)

Thus we see that those who turn away from Divine guidance are of a similar nature and use the same arguments. They are blind to everything other than following in their forefathers' footsteps. They close their minds to any new evidence, rejecting any new way even though it may be better, rely on solid argument and bring better results. Such a persistently deviant nature, which will not open its eyes or mind to the truth, deserves nothing but destruction. Such is the fate put before the unbelievers so that, perchance, they will take heed.

2

Blindness Out of Choice

Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, (26)

وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَٰهِيمُ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوْمِهِۦٓ
إِنَّنِى بَرَآءٌ مِّمَّا تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' (27)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِى فَطَرَنِى فَإِنَّهُۥ سَيَهْدِينِ ﴿٢٧﴾

He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God]. (28)

وَجَعَلَهَا كَلِمَةًۢ بَاقِيَةً فِى عَقِبِهِۦ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. (29)

بَلْ مَتَّعْتُ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ وَءَابَآءَهُمْ حَتَّىٰ
جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْحَقُّ وَرَسُولٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.' (30)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْحَقُّ قَالُوا۟ هَٰذَا سِحْرٌ
وَإِنَّا بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانُ عَلَىٰ رَجُلٍ مِّنَ ٱلْقَرْيَتَيْنِ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٣١﴾

They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?' (31)

أَهُمْ يَقْسِمُونَ رَحْمَتَ رَبِّكَ ۚ نَحْنُ قَسَمْنَا بَيْنَهُم مَّعِيشَتَهُمْ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ وَرَفَعْنَا بَعْضَهُمْ فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ دَرَجَٰتٍ لِّيَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُهُم بَعْضًا سُخْرِيًّا ۗ وَرَحْمَتُ رَبِّكَ خَيْرٌ مِّمَّا يَجْمَعُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. (32)

وَلَوْلَآ أَن يَكُونَ ٱلنَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَٰحِدَةً لَّجَعَلْنَا لِمَن يَكْفُرُ بِٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ لِبُيُوتِهِمْ سُقُفًا مِّن فِضَّةٍ وَمَعَارِجَ عَلَيْهَا يَظْهَرُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, (33)

وَلِبُيُوتِهِمْ أَبْوَٰبًا وَسُرُرًا عَلَيْهَا يَتَّكِـُٔونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

gates, couches on which to recline, (34)

وَزُخْرُفًا ۚ وَإِن كُلُّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمَّا مَتَٰعُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ وَٱلْـَٔاخِرَةُ عِندَ رَبِّكَ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing. (35)

وَمَن يَعْشُ عَن ذِكْرِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ نُقَيِّضْ لَهُ شَيْطَانًا فَهُوَ لَهُ قَرِينٌ ﴿٣٦﴾

We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade. (36)

وَإِنَّهُمْ لَيَصُدُّونَهُمْ عَنِ السَّبِيلِ وَيَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُم مُّهْتَدُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided. (37)

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَنَا قَالَ يَا لَيْتَ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكَ بُعْدَ الْمَشْرِقَيْنِ فَبِئْسَ الْقَرِينُ ﴿٣٨﴾

When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.' Evil indeed are you for a comrade! (38)

وَلَن يَنفَعَكُمُ الْيَوْمَ إِذ ظَّلَمْتُمْ أَنَّكُمْ فِي الْعَذَابِ مُشْتَرِكُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering. (39)

أَفَأَنتَ تُسْمِعُ الصُّمَّ أَوْ تَهْدِي الْعُمْيَ وَمَن كَانَ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error? (40)

فَإِمَّا نَذْهَبَنَّ بِكَ فَإِنَّا مِنْهُم مُّنتَقِمُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; (41)

أَوْ نُرِيَنَّكَ الَّذِي وَعَدْنَاهُمْ فَإِنَّا عَلَيْهِم مُّقْتَدِرُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them. (42)

فَٱسْتَمْسِكْ بِٱلَّذِىٓ أُوحِىَ إِلَيْكَ ۖ إِنَّكَ
عَلَىٰ صِرَٰطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a straight path; (43)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَذِكْرٌ لَّكَ وَلِقَوْمِكَ ۖ
وَسَوْفَ تُسْـَٔلُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

and it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account. (44)

وَسْـَٔلْ مَنْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ مِن
رُّسُلِنَآ أَجَعَلْنَا مِن دُونِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ
ءَالِهَةً يُعْبَدُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?' (45)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِلَىٰ
فِرْعَوْنَ وَمَلَإِيْهِۦ فَقَالَ إِنِّى
رَسُولُ رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' (46)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِذَا هُم مِّنْهَا
يَضْحَكُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them, (47)

وَمَا نُرِيهِم مِّنْ ءَايَةٍ إِلَّا هِىَ أَكْبَرُ
مِنْ أُخْتِهَا ۖ وَأَخَذْنَٰهُم بِٱلْعَذَابِ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. (48)

وَقَالُوا۟ يَٰٓأَيُّهَ ٱلسَّاحِرُ ٱدْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ بِمَا
عَهِدَ عِندَكَ إِنَّنَا لَمُهْتَدُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' (49)

Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word. (50)

فَلَمَّا كَشَفْنَا عَنْهُمُ الْعَذَابَ إِذَا هُمْ يَنْكُثُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? (51)

وَنَادَىٰ فِرْعَوْنُ فِي قَوْمِهِ قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ أَلَيْسَ لِي مُلْكُ مِصْرَ وَهَٰذِهِ الْأَنْهَارُ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِي ۖ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? (52)

أَمْ أَنَا خَيْرٌ مِّنْ هَٰذَا الَّذِي هُوَ مَهِينٌ وَلَا يَكَادُ يُبِينُ ﴿٥٢﴾

Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?' (53)

فَلَوْلَا أُلْقِيَ عَلَيْهِ أَسْوِرَةٌ مِّن ذَهَبٍ أَوْ جَاءَ مَعَهُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ مُقْتَرِنِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil. (54)

فَاسْتَخَفَّ قَوْمَهُ فَأَطَاعُوهُ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَوْمًا فَاسِقِينَ ﴿٥٤﴾

When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; (55)

فَلَمَّا آسَفُونَا انتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ فَأَغْرَقْنَاهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations. (56)

فَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ سَلَفًا وَمَثَلًا لِّلْآخِرِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

Overview

The Quraysh, the major Arabian tribe living in Makkah at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān, used to say that they were Abraham's descendants, which was true. They also claimed that they followed Abraham's faith, which was untrue. Abraham espoused monotheism, clear and undistorted. It was for his belief in the One God that he abandoned his father and his people, after he was subjected to execution by burning. His religion is based on this basic belief. He urged his children and descendants to remain true to it. Thus, no trace of polytheism is ever found in his faith.

In this section of the *sūrah* the Arabs are made to see this historical fact so that they might check their claims against it. The *sūrah* also reports their objections to the Prophet Muḥammad's message: "*They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?'*" (Verse 31) It shows the basic flaw in this argument: not only does it disregard the true values on which God wants human life to be based but it also espouses false values which turn them away from true guidance. Once the truth is outlined, the *sūrah* tells them of the fate of those who prefer to remain blind to God's remembrance. It also explains why such a choice was made which boils down to nothing less than following what Satan whispers. At the end of this section, the *sūrah* consoles God's messenger, who is grieved by their choice. He is told that he cannot make the blind see nor the deaf hear. They will have their due requital, whether he lives to see how God punishes them or God chooses to delay such punishment. He is directed, therefore, to hold fast to what is revealed to him as it represents the truth preached by all former messengers: "*Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?*" (Verse 45)

In this section we are also given an episode from Moses' story, which reflects the Arabs' attitude to God's messenger. It seems that the same objections are repeated again: Pharaoh and his people adhered to the same false values upheld by the pagan Arabs.

The Principle Abraham Urged

> *Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God].* (Verses 26–28)

The precept of monotheism rejected by the Quraysh was nothing but the belief advocated by Abraham, from whom they descended. It was this great principle that Abraham declared to his own father and people, thus rejecting their false creed, disowning their traditional worship. He did not adopt falsehood simply because his father and people practised it. In fact, he did not pay them any courtesy when he declared his rejection of it in a clear and emphatic statement quoted in the Qur'ān: "*I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.*" (Verses 26–27)

It appears from Abraham's statement that although his people did not deny God's existence, they nonetheless assigned partners to Him and worshipped others beside Him. Therefore, Abraham disowned all those they worshipped other than God. He described God by His attribute that makes Him the One to be worshipped, which is the fact that He initiates and originates. It is He who deserves to be worshipped because He is the One who creates. He also stated his firm belief that God would give him guidance. He created him and He knew how to grant him guidance.

Abraham clearly stated this precept of God's oneness to which the whole universe testifies. He said it and made it "*an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God].*" (Verse 28) It fell to Abraham to have the largest share in establishing this precept in life, delivering it to future generations through his seed. A number of his descendants were prophets and messengers, among whom three belong to the very select group of messengers endowed with the strongest resolve. These three are Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them all). Today, scores of centuries after Abraham, more

than a billion people who follow the three Divine religions are indebted to Abraham for their belief in the fundamental principle of God's oneness. It was he who made it an abiding precept among his descendants. Many of them may abandon it, but it remains firm, clear and undistorted. Thus, people will always have a chance to return to God, their Creator, and worship Him. This represents a return to the truth, understanding it and holding firm to it.

Mankind knew the principle of God's oneness before Abraham, through many prophets such as Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and perhaps Idrīs, as also through other messengers who did not have a continuous line of descendants who could revive and advocate the principle. It was, therefore, with Abraham that this principle took firm root on earth. It continued to be advocated by his descendants, with a continuous line of prophethood, up to the last messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), who descended from Abraham through his son, Ishmael, and who bore the greatest similarity to him.[2] Muḥammad stated the principle of God's oneness in its final and most comprehensive form, a form that influences every human activity and life concept.

How did those Arabs, descending from Abraham, receive this principle? They had after all been far removed from it for generations. Indeed, they had forgotten Abraham's faith to the extent that the principle of God's oneness was alien to them, viewed as exceedingly singular. They gave the Prophet preaching it a very bad reception, judging the Divine message by earthly standards. Hence, their criteria were flawed:

> *I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.' They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities.' Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to*

2. Jābir quotes the Prophet as saying: "I have been shown earlier prophets. I found Moses (peace be upon him) to be a tall, slim type of man, as though he belonged to the men of Shanū'ah [One of the tribes of Yemen]. I saw Jesus (peace be upon him) and the person I know who has the closest similarity to him is 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd. I saw Abraham (peace be upon him) and the one who bears closest similarity to him is your man, [meaning himself]."– al-Bukhārī

them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing. (Verses 29–35)

The *sūrah* turns to speak of those people present at the time of revelation: "*I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear.*" (Verse 29) It is as though the *sūrah* is saying: 'Let us not talk about Abraham, for these people have no relation to him. We will discuss their situation specifically, which has no relevance to Abraham and what he advocated. God says that He allowed these people and their ancestors to enjoy life, providing them with much, and allowing them a long life, until the truth came to them in the shape of the Qur'ān, and there came to them a messenger who stated things clearly. Nevertheless, "*Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.'*" (Verse 30)

The truth, which is always clearly manifest, cannot be confused with sorcery. What they said was conjecture and they were the first to know that it was false. The elders of the Quraysh could not have been blind to the truth of the message of the Qur'ān, yet they aimed to deceive the masses: first by alleging that it was sorcery and secondly by reaffirming their rejection of it: "*This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.*" (Verse 30) In this way, they sought to impress the masses by showing themselves to be confident of what they said. Like all who are deluded, the masses would then follow them. What the Quraysh elders feared most was that they might lose their influence over people. Should the people see the truth of the principle of God's oneness, no leader would have any influence except within the framework of worshipping God alone.

Whom to Entrust with God's Message

The Qur'ān describes their confused values and standards as they objected to the choice of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as the one to bring them light and the message of the truth: "*They also say: Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31) The two cities they referred to were Makkah and Ṭā'if. The Prophet belonged to the most distinguished family in the clan of Hāshim of the Quraysh tribe, which were the elite among Arabs. He was also known to be a man of high principles and fine manners, even before he was chosen as God's messenger. However, he was not a tribal chief, while his environment placed much store on such considerations. Hence their objection: "*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31)

God certainly knows best whom to entrust with His message. He chose the man whom He knew to be best suited to the task. Limitless is God in His glory! He chose a man whose paramount qualities were his morality and dedication, both of which are part of the nature and essence of the Islamic message. For the delivery of His message, He chose neither a tribal chief nor a man of wealth or social influence. This because He did not wish any earthly value to cast a shadow over the message bestowed from on high. It should neither be adorned with an earthly jewel nor be influenced by any alien effect. Thus, no one would embrace it to achieve ambition, and no one would seek it for unfair gain.

With their narrow view of worldly pleasures and lack of awareness of the nature of the Divine message, the Arabs objected to the choice of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as God's messenger, suggesting that a recognized leader of either of the two cities would have been preferable. The *sūrah* denounces their objections and reminds them of how God bestows His grace on whomever He chooses of His servants. It shows the flaw inherent in their concepts which confuse worldly values with Divine ones. It also makes clear to them how their values score in God's accurate measure: "*Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may*

take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass." (Verse 32)

How singular! What business do they have in apportioning God's grace when they cannot even determine their own provisions? Whatever comes their way of earthly provisions is determined by God, according to His wisdom and how He wants life on earth to progress: "*It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service.*" (Verse 32)

People's livelihood and provisions in this present life are influenced by their individual talents, life circumstances and social relations. The way they are shared out among individuals and communities is subject to all these factors. Its sharing, however, differs from one generation and society to another, according to the systems, relations and general circumstances of each. The one essential feature which has never been absent, even under the most government-controlled system, is that people's shares are different. It has never happened that people receive equal shares, not even under artificial social orders claiming to enshrine absolute equality.

The result is that some people are raised in rank above others; a situation that occurs in all societies and generations. The purpose for such difference is that "*some of them may take others into their service.*" (Verse 32) When the wheel of life turns, some people will inevitably be made to serve others. What is meant here is not that one class or one person should behave arrogantly towards another. This is a naïve understanding that is unsuited to the Divine pronouncement. The significance of the statement is longer lasting than any change or development in human society. All mankind serve one another as the wheel of life turns with them all. The one whose provisions are stinted serves the one who is affluent, but the reverse is true as well. Those who have plenty accumulate wealth, using it for their living and employ others who will then receive their provisions by virtue of their work. Each one thus serves another, and it is the difference in their livelihoods and their provisions that enable them to use one another in the course of life. Thus, a worker is in the service of the engineer and the employer,

while the engineer is in the service of the employer and the worker, and the employer, in turn, serves both engineer and worker in like manner. All contribute to man's assignment on earth through their differences in abilities, talents, livelihoods and incomes.

I know that many advocates of government-controlled systems cite this verse in their criticism of Islam and its social and economic systems. I also think that some Muslims feel uneasy about this statement. They feel that they need to defend Islam against the charge of establishing distinction between people in their provisions so that some of them can take others into service. It is time, however, that the advocates of Islam should stand firm, feeling absolutely proud of their faith. They need not defend it against a trivial accusation that will always remain unsubstantiated. Islam states permanent facts that remain part of the nature of the universe for as long as life continues.

It is part of the nature of human life that it relies on differences between individual human beings with respect to their abilities and talents, as well as to the type of work each one can do and the degree of excellence a man or a woman can achieve. These differences are necessary to ensure the fulfilment of a wide range of roles needed to discharge man's mission on earth. Had all human beings been copies of the same model, life on earth could not have survived. Numerous types of work would not have had corresponding abilities. They would have remained undone because there would not have been people who could do them. The One who created life and willed that it should steadily progress also created people with different talents and abilities to correspond to the different tasks that needed fulfilling. It is through such differences in roles that differences of livelihood and provisions occur. Such is the rule.

Greater than Life's Riches

So much for people's livelihood in this present life. Beyond it, however, is something far greater: "*Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass.*" (Verse 32) God bestows His grace on those whom He selects, knowing that they deserve it. There is, however, no

connection whatsoever between God's grace and what people have in this present life. Nor is there any connection between it and the values of this world. Such lots are worthless according to God's measure. Hence, they are given to good and bad people, while God's grace is preserved for those whom He chooses.

Earthly values are so petty and insignificant that had God so willed, He would have given them in plenty to those who disbelieve in Him. The only reason behind not doing so is that such plenty would then become a source of delusion, preventing many people from accepting the Divine faith:

> *Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.* (Verses 33–35)

It is God who knows man's weaknesses best and what effect wealth and affluence have on him. Had it not been for the fact that people would be lured by such luxuries, God would have given to those who disbelieve in the Lord of Grace abundance in this world. He would have given them homes with roofs of silver and staircases made of gold. He would also have given them houses with many doors, indeed palaces with many couches to recline upon and gold ornaments as decor. Giving such luxuries in plenty to disbelievers clearly shows how worthless these items are on God's scales. "*Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world.*" (Verse 35) It is all no more than a fleeting enjoyment that lasts no more than this present life. Moreover, it is all no more than a trifling suited to this lower life.

"*It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.*" (Verse 35) These are the ones who are honoured by God because they are God-fearing. He stores for them what is better, greater in value and more lasting. He grants them what is special. They are

thus distinguished over those who deny God, the Lord of Grace, for these are only given the trifling enjoyments of this worldly life, which animals also share.

Worldly luxuries, examples of which are given in these verses, dazzle large numbers of people, particularly when they see unbelievers enjoying such commodities while believers are deprived of them. They may see good believers suffering hardship while unbelievers enjoy power, wealth and high position. God knows the effects of such situations on the majority of people. Therefore, He explains to them how worthless these luxuries are in His unerring scales and how truly worthy what He has in store for believers is. A believing heart is reassured that God chooses only what is right and suitable for each group. The Makkan unbelievers who objected to God's choice of a man who had not been given much wealth rated people according to what they have of money and position. These verses make clear how trifling these are in God's sight, so much so that He gives them to the worst of His creatures, the people whom He dislikes most. Hence, affluence and its like does not indicate a person's position with God.

Thus the Qur'ān puts matters in their right perspective, showing the basis on which provisions are given in both this life and the life to come and stating those values that are true and consistent. In doing so, it lays down the basic principles that are unaffected by life's circumstances, developments, different creeds, social systems or environments. Life has its consistent, unchanging rules that govern its development. People who look only at changing appearances and do not reflect on the permanent rules tend to overlook this God-made law. They think that change applies to the essence of things as well as their form and appearance. Hence, they allege that the ever continuing march of life precludes the existence of permanent rules and values. The only law that they believe to be unchanging is that whereby everything undergoes continuous change. We, who believe in Islam, see in what is around us the truth of what God has stated: consistency and change are present, side by side, in every corner and aspect of the universe. The most obvious example before us is the difference in livelihood and provisions between people, and their varied causes and rates.

Which Type of Comrade

The *sūrah* moves on to explain the fate of those who are given plenty of the luxuries of this world but who remain unmindful of their duty of obedience to God and glorifying Him so as to deserve the great prize He grants on the Day of Judgement to those who fear Him:

> *We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade. These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided. When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.' Evil indeed are you for a comrade! Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering.* (Verses 36–39)

The Arabic text uses the term *'ashā* as the choice of unbelievers. This term signifies a tiredness of the eyes that prevents them from seeing things. It mostly occurs when facing a glaring light which the human eye cannot look into, or in the evening as darkness begins to descend when a weak eye cannot see things clearly. It may also be the result of illness. Its usage here, signifies blindness and a wilful turning away from God, the Lord of Grace.

"*We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade.*" (Verse 36) It has been God's will that when man chooses to neglect His remembrance, Satan finds his way to him and becomes his comrade, whispering to him and making evil things seem goodly and attractive. In the Arabic text, this verse is stated in the conditional form to express a consistent rule that makes the result inevitable when the cause occurs. Thus the evil comrade will certainly turn his comrade away from the right path, even though such a person may continue to think that he is on the right track: "*These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided.*" (Verse 37) This is the worst thing that one comrade can do for another: turning him away from the right path and not allowing him to wake up or reflect on what he is doing. Instead, he keeps him deluded, thinking that he is

doing well, until he comes face to face with his inevitable end. Note, too, that the verse uses the present tense, implying that this is going on now before the eyes of onlookers, though those who are blind do not see it.

The end comes all of a sudden while they are still deluded: "*When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.*" (Verse 38) In an instant we move from this present world to the next. Those who chose to be blind unexpectedly arrive at their destination and wake up like a drunken person regains his consciousness. They open their weak eyes and each one of them looks at his evil comrade who led him to ruin while assuring him of safety. He is so enraged with him that he says to him: "*Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West. Evil indeed are you for a comrade!*" (Verse 38) I wish I had never met you and that a great gulf had existed between us. The *sūrah* then makes this comment on the exchange between the two comrades: "*Evil indeed are you for a comrade!*" (Verse 38)

As the curtain drops on them both, we hear a word that crushes all hope for them: "*Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering.*" (Verse 39) The suffering of each is given in full measure. It is not something to share out among them so as to reduce its effect.

Making the Deaf Hear

The *sūrah* now addresses the Prophet with a word of consolation so that he does not grieve about those who turned away from him, disbelieving in his message. It encourages him to hold on to the truth revealed to him from on high, as it is the same word of truth given to every messenger of God:

> *Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error? If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them. Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a*

straight path; and it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account. Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?' (Verses 40–45)

This point is repeated several times in the Qur'ān to comfort the Prophet and to explain the nature of guidance and error, attributing them both to God's will. They are part of the task assigned to God's messengers, (peace be upon them all). Here the *sūrah* puts clear lines between man's limited power, even at its strongest level given to prophets, and God's free and unrestricted power. It emphasizes God's oneness in one of the most inspiring images in the Qur'ān.

"*Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error?*" (Verse 40) They are neither deaf nor blind, but akin to both in so far as they have chosen to turn away from Divine guidance and follow error. The task assigned to the Prophet is to put the facts before the ones who hear and to guide those who see. When people shut down their receptive faculties and refuse to listen to the discourse addressing their hearts and souls, the Prophet can do nothing for them. There is no way, then, that he can guide them to the truth. He should not grieve over their error, after having fulfilled his task to the best of his ability.

When the Prophet has done his duty, God will now determine matters: "*If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them.*" (Verses 41–42) The case is resolved either way. Should the Prophet die first, God will determine the punishment of those who rejected his message. If, on the other hand, he remains alive until the fulfilment of what they were warned against, God is certainly able to mete out what His warnings contain. They cannot escape. What He determines will take place. In either case, the matter is subject to His will. The message is His, while the Prophet is only His messenger.

"*Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a straight path.*" (Verse 43) Hold on to what you have been given and go along your way, reassured, caring little for them and what

they do. For, "*you certainly are on a straight path.*" It will neither bend nor deviate. This faith is closely related to the essential truth of the universe. It is consistent with the basic law that governs the universe. It leads its follower to the Lord Creator, safe from all error and deviation. God reassures His messenger, re-emphasizing this truth. The advocates of Islam in subsequent generations should find in it reassurance and comfort, even though they may suffer a great deal at the hands of those who have gone astray.

"*And it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account.*" (Verse 44) This verse may be understood in two ways: this Qur'ān is a reminder to you and your people, and you will be questioned about it on the Day of Judgement. Now that you have been given this reminder, you are left with no argument if you fail to follow it. Alternatively, it means that the Qur'ān is an honour that raises the standing of the Prophet and his people. This is what has taken place in reality. As for the Prophet, hundreds of millions of people pray to God at all times of the day and night to bless him and grant him peace; this for more than fourteen centuries. Hundreds of millions of hearts will continue to love him and bless him until the end of time. As for his people, they were very much on the margin of life until the Qur'ān was revealed, giving them the leading role in human history. When they carried its message to the world, they had its leadership, but only for as long as they held on to the Qur'ān. When they abandoned it, they were reduced to the lowest level among humanity. They were left at the tail end after once having been distinguished leaders. Those people whom God has chosen to carry His message and to assume mankind's leadership will face a great responsibility should they abandon their trust: "*you will all be called to account.*" (Verse 44) Of the two interpretations, I prefer this second meaning as it is broader in scope.

"*Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?'*" (Verse 45) God's oneness is the central point of Divine religion ever since the first of His messengers. On what basis, then, do those who worship other beings rely? The Qur'ān states this truth here in a unique image that shows the Prophet asking the messengers before him whether God has

appointed deities to be worshipped other than Himself. The very question implies its definitive and categorical answer, given by each and every one of God's messengers. It is a very pleasing image, one that employs a strong, inspiring and effective style.

Needless to say, there are gulfs of time and place between the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and the messengers who went before him. There is also the gulf between life and death, which is far greater than the gulfs of time and place. Yet all these gulfs totally disappear before the essential truth of the unity of the Divine message based on God's oneness. It is this truth that remains solidly present while considerations of time, place, life and death, as also of all changing phenomena, disappear. The dead and the living all testify to it at all times. Such are the connotations of this remarkable Qur'ānic statement.

However, in relation to the Prophet and his brothers, the messengers of God sent before him, and their bond with their Lord, nothing is considered far or near. At any Divine moment, all barriers are removed, and the essential, fundamental truth appears in full colour. It is the truth of all existence that transcends all barriers of time, place, shape and image. At this moment, the Prophet asks and receives the answer, as happened to him on his night journey when he led all earlier prophets in prayer.

When we look at such a statement, it is better for us not to think of limitations in our life. What is familiar to us in life is by no means the total law governing the entire universe. We should remember that we only know some of the phenomena operating in the universe and see some of their effects when we recognize an aspect of its laws. There are barriers in our constitutional make-up and in our senses that limit our perception to what is familiar to us. Beyond that, there is a realm that we cannot fathom.

The Same Old Argument

The *sūrah* continues to console the Prophet in the face of the objections raised about God's choice of him as the messenger by the chiefs of his people, people who upheld the false values of the present world. In this context, the *sūrah* relates an episode from Moses' history

depicting how Pharaoh and his people also upheld the same values. The Quraysh elders said: "*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31) In former times, Pharaoh took pride in his power and kingdom, arrogantly asking: "*Is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see?*" (Verse 51) Proud and arrogant, he pointed to Moses, God's prophet and messenger, who had no great worldly wealth or position, and said: "*Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear?*" (Verse 52) Pharaoh also made a suggestion similar to the unbelieving Quraysh: "*Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?*" (Verse 53) It sounds like a musical recording, played over and over again.

The *sūrah* shows how the deluded masses responded, despite the miracles shown by Moses and the tests to which they were subjected. Every time a hardship befell them, they would cry out to Moses to pray to his Lord to lift their affliction. The *sūrah* also explains the fate they suffered after they failed to heed the warning: "*When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*" (Verses 55–56) Yet these later unbelievers still do not take heed.

Throughout this episode, the unity of the Divine message is clearly apparent. Similarly, the nature of the tyrannical elders and their reception of the message of the truth is the same. They all cling to the trivial values of this world. We also see the nature of the masses who are easily led astray by their leaders.

> *We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them.* (Verses 46–47)

The episode starts with a very brief reference to the first meeting between Moses and Pharaoh, as a prelude to the main point intended here, which is to portray the similarity of the objections made by Pharaoh and the pagan Arabs, as also their similar values. It sums up the nature of Moses' message in these words: "*I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 46) It is the same truth stated by every

messenger: that he is 'a messenger' sent by 'the Lord of all the worlds'. The *sūrah* then provides a very quick reference to the signs given to Moses, adding how the people received these: "*When he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them.*" (Verse 47) The arrogant and the ignorant always behave this way.

This is followed by a reference to the testing hardships God inflicted on Pharaoh and his people, which are detailed in other *sūrahs*:

> *Yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word.* (Verses 48–50)

The signs shown by Moses did not provide enough motivation for people to believe, yet each was greater than the one before it. This confirms what God says in several places that such signs do not provide guidance to a heart if it is not ready to listen, and that God's messengers cannot make the deaf hear or the blind see. What is most singular in what God describes of Pharaoh's and his people's attitude is that when they spoke to Moses, they said: "*Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.*" (Verse 49) They appeal to him to do his best to lift their hardship, yet they address him as '*sorcerer*'. They also say, '*Pray to your Lord*' while he tells them that he is '*a messenger from the Lord of all the worlds,*' not his own special Lord to whom only he and a few followers submit. Neither miracles nor God's messenger's words touched their hearts, despite their promise: "*We shall now follow the right way.*" Such promises are often forgotten: "*Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word.*" (Verse 50)

The masses may be influenced by miracles, and the truth may find its way to their hearts that have long been deceived. To forestall this, Pharaoh appeared before them in his full regalia, adorned in splendour. He tried to deceive them with a superficial argument, one that unfortunately appeals to those who have long endured tyranny:

> *Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?'* (Verses 51–53)

The kingdom of Egypt and the rivers flowing at Pharaoh's feet are there, before their very eyes. The masses are deluded by such apparent power and splendour. By contrast, the kingdom of the heavens and earth, and all that is between them, compared to which Egypt is no more than a little particle, requires believing hearts to perceive. Only such believers can draw the right comparison. Under the yoke of tyranny that has long subjugated them, the masses are dazzled by the glitter they see before them. They do not stretch their minds to reflect on the kingdom of the universe and to whom it belongs.

Pharaoh knew how to manipulate his people's hearts and delude them with his riches: "*Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear?*" (Verse 52) What he meant by referring to '*this contemptible wretch*' was that Moses was not a king, a prince, or a man of power or wealth. Or perhaps he meant that Moses belonged to the Israelites, a wretched and enslaved community in Egypt. His other description of Moses as one '*who can hardly make his meaning clear*' refers to his speech impediment. By the time of this encounter with Pharaoh, however, Moses was cured of this by God in answer to his prayer: "*My Lord, open up my heart [to Your light], and make my mission easy for me, and free my tongue from its impediment, so that people may understand what I say.*" (20: 25–28) Nothing now prevented him from making his meaning clear. In the eyes of the masses, Pharaoh, with his terrestrial kingdom, was better than Moses, even though he had the word of truth, was a prophet, and advocated the faith that ensured safety from hell.

"*Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him?*" (Verse 53) Is such a petty thing as a gold bracelet needed to confirm a Divine message? Is a mere trifling to be valued as greater than the miracles God gave to His messenger? Or, perhaps, Pharaoh meant that Moses should have

been crowned as king to give him power as well as the message. "*Why have no angels come to accompany him?*" (Verse 53) This is yet another deceptive objection, one that is often levelled at God's messengers.

"*Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil.*" (Verse 54) That tyrants make fools of their people is a familiar story. First of all, they isolate their people from all sources of knowledge, withholding the facts until they are forgotten and no longer sought after. They use all types of influences until their minds are fully convinced of them. Thereafter, it is easy to make fools of them and lead them wherever they want them to go. Yet no tyrant can do this to his people unless they are transgressors, turning away from God's straight path after having abandoned the standards of His faith. Conversely, it is extremely difficult to try to delude believers or make fools of them. Hence, the Qur'ān gives the reason for the response Pharaoh received from his people: "*Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil.*" (Verse 54)

The time of tests, warnings and education was over. God was fully aware that these people would not believe. The masses willingly obeyed Pharaoh, an arrogant tyrant, turning a blind eye to God's light and His clear signs. Therefore, the warning had to be fulfilled and God's word was issued: "*When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*" (Verses 55–56)

Here, God is speaking about Himself in the context of retribution inflicted on people whom He destroyed. This is meant to highlight His limitless power. What the *sūrah* describes is a situation where these people were guilty of a great crime incurring God's anger. Therefore, "*We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all*", meaning Pharaoh, the notables among his people and his army. In this way did they meet their end when they tried to pursue Moses and his people. God made of them the ancestors of every erring generation. He also set them as "*an example for later generations*". (Verse 56) Hence, later communities should learn their story and benefit from the lessons it delivers.

Thus, this episode of Moses' story reflects similar attitudes to those of the pagan Arabs as they confronted God's last messenger. It is mentioned here so as to comfort and support the Prophet and those who believed with him. It warns the unbelievers against a fate similar to that of earlier people. This is one example of how the Qur'ān uses a historical account as an edifying narrative. The *sūrah* then gives us an episode from Jesus' story against the backdrop of the Arabs' argument in defence of their worship of angels and the comparison they cite, as some Christians worship Jesus. This is given in the last passage of the *sūrah*.

3

When Friends Turn Enemies

وَلَمَّا ضُرِبَ ٱبْنُ مَرْيَمَ مَثَلًا إِذَا قَوْمُكَ
مِنْهُ يَصِدُّونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, (57)

وَقَالُوٓاْ ءَأَٰلِهَتُنَا خَيْرٌ أَمْ هُوَ ۚ مَا ضَرَبُوهُ
لَكَ إِلَّا جَدَلًۢا ۚ بَلْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ خَصِمُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. (58)

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا عَبْدٌ أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَيْهِ وَجَعَلْنَٰهُ
مَثَلًا لِّبَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ﴿٥٩﴾

He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel. (59)

وَلَوْ نَشَآءُ لَجَعَلْنَا مِنكُم مَّلَٰٓئِكَةً فِى
ٱلْأَرْضِ يَخْلُفُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth. (60)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَعِلْمٌ لِّلسَّاعَةِ فَلَا تَمْتَرُنَّ بِهَا
وَٱتَّبِعُونِ ۚ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطٌ مُّسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٦١﴾

He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. (61)

وَلَا يَصُدَّنَّكُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَكُمْ
عَدُوٌّ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٦٢﴾

Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy. (62)

When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. (63)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَ عِيسَىٰ بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ قَالَ قَدْ جِئْتُكُم بِٱلْحِكْمَةِ وَلِأُبَيِّنَ لَكُم بَعْضَ ٱلَّذِى تَخْتَلِفُونَ فِيهِ ۖ فَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿٦٣﴾

God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone. This is a straight path.' (64)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ رَبِّى وَرَبُّكُمْ فَٱعْبُدُوهُ ۚ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطٌ مُّسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٦٤﴾

Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (65)

فَٱخْتَلَفَ ٱلْأَحْزَابُ مِنۢ بَيْنِهِمْ ۖ فَوَيْلٌ لِّلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ مِنْ عَذَابِ يَوْمٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٦٥﴾

What are they waiting for other than the Last Hour, which will come upon them all of a sudden and take them unawares? (66)

هَلْ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّا ٱلسَّاعَةَ أَن تَأْتِيَهُم بَغْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

On that Day, friends will become enemies to one another, except for the God-fearing. (67)

ٱلْأَخِلَّآءُ يَوْمَئِذٍۭ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ إِلَّا ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٦٧﴾

You, servants of Mine, no fear need you have today, nor shall you grieve. (68)

يَٰعِبَادِ لَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلْيَوْمَ وَلَآ أَنتُمْ تَحْزَنُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

You, who have believed in Our revelations and surrendered yourselves to Us, (69)

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَكَانُوا۟ مُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٦٩﴾

enter paradise, you and your spouses, in pure happiness. (70)

ٱدۡخُلُواْ ٱلۡجَنَّةَ أَنتُمۡ وَأَزۡوَٰجُكُمۡ تُحۡبَرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

They will be waited upon with trays and goblets of gold; and there will be found all that the souls may desire and the eyes may delight in. There you shall abide. (71)

يُطَافُ عَلَيۡهِم بِصِحَافٍ مِّن ذَهَبٍ وَأَكۡوَابٍۖ وَفِيهَا مَا تَشۡتَهِيهِ ٱلۡأَنفُسُ وَتَلَذُّ ٱلۡأَعۡيُنُۖ وَأَنتُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

This is the garden that shall be your own on account of what you used to do. (72)

وَتِلۡكَ ٱلۡجَنَّةُ ٱلَّتِيٓ أُورِثۡتُمُوهَا بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

You shall have there fruits in abundance, from which to eat. (73)

لَكُمۡ فِيهَا فَٰكِهَةٞ كَثِيرَةٞ مِّنۡهَا تَأۡكُلُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

The evildoers shall abide in the suffering of hell. (74)

إِنَّ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ فِي عَذَابِ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

It will not be lightened for them; they will remain in utter despair. (75)

لَا يُفَتَّرُ عَنۡهُمۡ وَهُمۡ فِيهِ مُبۡلِسُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

We never wronged them; it was they who have wronged themselves. (76)

وَمَا ظَلَمۡنَٰهُمۡ وَلَٰكِن كَانُواْ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

They will cry, 'Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!' He will answer: 'You are here to stay.' (77)

وَنَادَوۡاْ يَٰمَٰلِكُ لِيَقۡضِ عَلَيۡنَا رَبُّكَۖ قَالَ إِنَّكُم مَّٰكِثُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

لَقَدْ جِئْنَٰكُم بِٱلْحَقِّ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَكُمْ
لِلْحَقِّ كَٰرِهُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

We have brought the truth to you, but most of you abhor the truth. (78)

أَمْ أَبْرَمُوٓا۟ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّا مُبْرِمُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our own. (79)

أَمْ يَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّا لَا نَسْمَعُ سِرَّهُمْ وَنَجْوَىٰهُم ۚ
بَلَىٰ وَرُسُلُنَا لَدَيْهِمْ يَكْتُبُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all. (80)

قُلْ إِن كَانَ لِلرَّحْمَٰنِ وَلَدٌ ۖ فَأَنَا۠ أَوَّلُ
ٱلْعَٰبِدِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

Say: 'If the Lord of Grace had a son, I would be the first to worship him.' (81)

سُبْحَٰنَ رَبِّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ رَبِّ
ٱلْعَرْشِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions. (82)

فَذَرْهُمْ يَخُوضُوا۟ وَيَلْعَبُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ يُلَٰقُوا۟
يَوْمَهُمُ ٱلَّذِى يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised. (83)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ إِلَٰهٌ وَفِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
إِلَٰهٌ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٨٤﴾

It is He alone who is God in heaven and God on earth; He alone is the Wise, the All-Knowing. (84)

وَتَبَارَكَ ٱلَّذِى لَهُۥ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا وَعِندَهُۥ عِلْمُ ٱلسَّاعَةِ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

Blessed is He to whom sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them belongs, and with whom the knowledge of the Last Hour rests, and to whom you shall be brought back. (85)

وَلَا يَمْلِكُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِهِ ٱلشَّفَٰعَةَ إِلَّا مَن شَهِدَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Those whom they invoke beside Him have no power of intercession, unlike those who know the truth and bear witness to it. (86)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَهُمْ لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

Yet if you ask them who created them they are sure to answer, 'God.' How is it, then, that they are so misled? (87)

وَقِيلِهِۦ يَٰرَبِّ إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ قَوْمٌ لَّا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

And [the Prophet] says: 'My Lord, these are people who will not believe.' (88)

فَٱصْفَحْ عَنْهُمْ وَقُلْ سَلَٰمٌ ۚ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾

Still, bear with them and say, 'Peace,' for in time they will come to know. (89)

Overview

In this final passage, the *sūrah* picks up the legends the pagan Arabs weaved around their worship of angels. It refers to one of the arguments they used to defend their absurd beliefs. It was a futile argument that reflected no attempt to arrive at the truth; it was more an exercise in polemics. They had been told that both they and what they worshipped were bound for hell. The reference here being to their idols that were

first intended as representations of angels, but which were later worshipped as deities. They were told that whoever worshipped anything other than God will be in hell together with the thing worshipped. In response, some of them cited the example of Jesus, who was worshipped by some of those who deviated from true Christianity. They asked whether Jesus would also be in hell? This was nothing but idle argument. They also claimed that they were better guided than the Christians who worshipped Jesus, a human being, while they worshipped the angels, God's daughters. All this was no more than compounded falsehood. In connection with this, the *sūrah* gives an account of Jesus, explaining the truth about him and his message, and the differences that gripped his people both before and after him.

Addressing all those who deviate from the true faith, the *sūrah* warns them against the sudden coming of the Last Hour. It moves on to portray a long scene of the Day of Judgement, giving an image of lasting happiness for the God-fearing and one of painful suffering for the guilty. Furthermore, the *sūrah* negates their legends concerning the angels, makes it clear that God is free of all that they allege concerning Him and outlines some of His attributes, including His complete ownership of both this life and the life to come. The *sūrah* concludes with a directive to the Prophet to be forbearing and to turn away from the unbelievers. They will come to know what is there to be known. This is an implicit warning to those who continue to argue after things have been made very clear.

Arguing About Jesus

> *Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel. Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth. He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy. When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom,*

and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone. This is a straight path. Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (Verses 57–65)

In his biography of the Prophet, Ibn Isḥāq gives the following report:

> The Prophet sat with al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah in the Sacred Mosque, and they were joined by al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith. There were a few other men from the Quraysh. The Prophet spoke to them, but al-Naḍr interrupted him. The Prophet argued with him until he silenced him. He then read to them a passage of the Qur'ān that included the verse that says: "*You and all that you were wont to worship instead of God are but the fuel of hell: that is what you are destined for.*" (21: 98) The Prophet then left.
>
> Then came 'Abdullāh ibn al-Ziba'rī of the Tamīm tribe who sat with them. Al-Walīd said to him: 'Al-Naḍr was no match for Muḥammad. Indeed Muḥammad said that both we and the deities we worship will be the fuel of hell.' Ibn al-Ziba'rī said: 'Had I been the one who argued with him I would have won. Ask Muḥammad whether everyone worshipped other than God will be in hell together with those worshipping him. Well, we worship the angels, and the Jews worship Ezra, while the Christians worship Jesus, son of Mary.' Al-Walīd and those who were in the Mosque admired what Ibn al-Ziba'rī had said and felt that he put forward a winning argument. When this was mentioned to the Prophet, he said: 'Anyone who likes to be worshipped in place of God will be joined to those who worship him. These people only worship Satan and whoever Satan orders them to worship.' God then revealed the verse that says: "*But those for whom [the decree of] ultimate good has already gone forth from Us will be kept far away from that hell.*" (21: 101) This means that Jesus, Ezra and other rabbis and priests who were sincere in their faith, but were then worshipped as deities by later people will be safe from hell.

> Furthermore, concerning the argument about Jesus being worshipped and the admiration of the argument by al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah and others, God revealed the verse that says: "*Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry.*" (Verse 57)

In *al-Kashshāf*, a commentary on the Qur'ān, al-Zamakhsharī gives a broadly similar report, without mentioning its source. Both reports show clearly how argumentative the pagan Arabs were. They were exactly as the Qur'ān describes them: "*They are contentious people*". (Verse 58) They were certainly skilful in dispute. They realized what the Qur'ān and the Prophet meant, but they tried hard to twist its meaning, indulged in polemics, exploiting the fact that the Qur'ānic statement was general in its implication. This is characteristic of everyone who is devoid of sincerity, seeking to manipulate words and phrases in order to twist what was a clear meaning. Therefore, the Prophet strictly prohibited contentious arguments. Abū Umāmah, a Companion of the Prophet, reports: "The Prophet came out once only to find some people involved in argument concerning the Qur'ān. He was so angry that he looked as though vinegar had been poured over his face. He then said to them: 'Do not argue about God's book citing parts of it against other parts. No community strays into error unless they are given to contentious argument.' He then quoted the Qur'ānic verse that says: '*They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people.*' (Verse 58)

Another possible interpretation of the statement, "*Who is better: our deities or he?*" is supported by the general drift of the verses referring to their legend about the angels. What they meant is that their worship of the angels is better than the Christians' worship of Jesus, because the angels are closer to God in their nature and descent. Exalted is God above all that they allege. Thus, the statement, '*They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people*', serves as a reply to Ibn al-Ziba'rī as suggested earlier. Moreover, it means that their citing of what the Christians worship is invalid, because it deviates from the truth of God's oneness. It is not right to compare one deviation from the truth with another; they are all false. This interpretation is reasonable.

Hence, the *sūrah* makes the following comment: "*He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel.*" (Verse 59) He was no deity to be worshipped, even though some Christians deviated from the true path and did worship him. He was only a favoured servant of God, and no blame attaches to him for the fact that people worshipped him. God granted him favours so that he would be an example for the Children of Israel to follow. However, they forgot the lesson and went astray.

The *sūrah* discusses the Arabs' legend about the angels, making it clear that they are part of God's creation. Had God willed, He would have made the angels succeed them on earth, or He would have transformed some people into angels to succeed them: "*Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth.*" (Verse 60) All questions of creation are determined by God; whatever He wills to create will surely come into existence. None of His creation has any relation to Him other than that of a created being with its Creator, a servant with its Master.

Another statement about Jesus reminds them of the Last Hour which they denied: "*He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy.*" (Verses 61–62) A number of the Prophet's statements speak of Jesus' second coming, a short time before the Last Hour. This is perhaps what is indicated in the statement: '*He is a portent of the Last Hour.*' It means that he informs of its approach. Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet as saying: "By Him who holds my soul in His hand, the son of Mary is about to come back among you, serving as a just arbiter. He will break the cross, kill the pig and abolish tribute money. Wealth will be so abundant that no one will accept money. Indeed one prostration before God will be better than this whole world and all that it contains." [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Abū Dāwūd.] Jābir quotes the Prophet as saying: "A group of my community will ever continue to fight, holding on to the truth, until the Day of Judgement. Jesus, son of Mary, will then come down and their commander will say to him: 'Come and lead us in prayer.' He will reply: 'No. Some of you lead others.' This is just an aspect of honour God has granted to this community." [Related by Muslim.]

All this belongs to the realm beyond our perception. We are informed of it by the Prophet who tells the truth and references to it are given in the Qur'ān. No human being has any say in this other than what has been stated in these two sources.

"*He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path.*" (Verse 61) They had strong doubts about the coming of the Last Hour, but the Qur'ān calls on them to be certain of it. Likewise, they steered away from guidance and the Qur'ān urges them, through God's messenger, to follow him along the straight path which ensures that its travellers will not go astray. It makes it clear to them that their deviation is only the result of their following Satan when they would be better advised to follow God's messenger: "*Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy.*" (Verse 62) The Qur'ān always reminds people of the on-going battle between them and Satan that has been raging since the time of Adam, their first father, and the first encounter in heaven. No one can be more heedless than one who knows that a watchful, sworn enemy is deliberately waiting for a chance to attack him and yet does not take care to protect himself. On the contrary, he moves closer to the determined enemy and even follows his lead.

Islam places man in the midst of this ever-raging battle with Satan. It assigns to him gains that are beyond anyone's imagination, should he be victorious. Likewise, his loss, should he be defeated, is beyond anyone's reckoning. Thus, Islam steers man's fighting ability to this on-going battle which asserts the humanity of man, giving him his special position among the rest of creatures. Thus, the highest aim for man on earth is to achieve victory against his enemy, Satan. Once he does, he overcomes evil and wickedness and establishes firm roots of goodness and purity.

The *sūrah* now speaks about Jesus, stating the truth about him and what he preached, and how his people differed about him, both before and after his time:

> *When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. God is my Lord and your Lord:*

so worship Him alone. This is a straight path. Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (Verses 63–65)

Thus, Jesus came to his people with clear signs, whether miracles God granted him or teachings that lead along the right way. He said to his people: '*I have come to you with wisdom*'. Whoever is granted wisdom is indeed granted much of what is good, and he is safe and assured of his way. Jesus' mission also clarified for them some of the questions over which they differed. Indeed, they differed on many aspects of the law of Moses, allowing their variances to split them into hostile factions. Jesus also invited them to maintain their fear of God and to obey him in the Divine message he delivered to them. He declared the principle of God's oneness in full clarity, admitting no compromise in it: "*God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone.*" (Verse 64) He never said that he was God, nor that he was God's son. He never made any reference to any relationship between him and God other than that of his being God's servant. Furthermore, he stated that his message demarcated a straight path without bend or error. Yet those who came after him disputed much, splitting into factions like those who preceded him. In this they were wrongdoers, relying on no sure information. Hence, the warning: "*Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day.*" (Verse 65)

Jesus' message was addressed to the Children of Israel. They were awaiting his coming to save them from their humiliating bondage to the Romans. Yet when he came, they denied and opposed him. Indeed, they even plotted to get him crucified. Jesus found them divided into numerous sects, the most important of which were as follows:

1. The Sadducees, named after Zadok, whose family retained custody of the Temple since the time of David and Solomon. According to their law, he must have been a descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother. For, custody of the Temple belonged to Aaron's descendants. Holding such an office, they were very strict on detailed worship rituals, denouncing any deviation. Nevertheless,

in personal matters, they were lax, enjoying life's pleasures. They denied the Day of Resurrection.

2. The Pharisees. They were in dispute with the Sadducees, objecting to their strict observation of worship rituals while denying the Day of Resurrection. Their most common characteristic was their disregard of worldly pleasures, even though some of them took pride in their knowledge. Jesus denounced such an attitude.
3. The Samaritans. They were a mixture of Jews and Assyrians. They believed only in the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Old Testament. They denied the later books accepted by other Jews as part of their scripture.
4. The Essenes, or Essenians. These were influenced by some philosophical doctrines, living in isolation of other Jewish sects. Theirs was an ascetic, strictly organized sect.

In addition, there were numerous other sects that gave rise to much confusion in Jewish beliefs and traditions. The Jews at the time tolerated humiliation under the Romans, and awaited their deliverance at the hands of the Messiah. When the Messiah, Jesus Christ, came to them declaring that '*God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone*', and preaching a law of tolerance and spiritualism, he was opposed by the professional clerics who gave paramount importance to rituals. He is reported to have said about them: "They make loads that are hard to carry and lay them on the shoulders of the people. However, they are not willing to lift a finger to move them. They do everything to attract people's attention. They make their headbands large and the tassels on their shawls long. They love the place of honour at dinners and the front seats in synagogues. They love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have people call them Rabbi." (Matthew 23: 4–7) He is also quoted as addressing them thus: "You, blind guides! You strain gnats out of your wine, but you swallow camels. How horrible it will be for you, scribes and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You clean the outsides of cups and dishes. But inside they are full of greed and uncontrolled desires. You blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cups and dishes so that the outside may also be clean. How horrible it will be for you, scribes

and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You are like whitewashed graves that look beautiful on the outside but inside are full of dead people's bones and every kind of impurity."[3] (Matthew 23: 24–27)

When we read today these words of Jesus (peace be upon him) and similar texts, we realize how applicable they are to professional clerics of all religions. They are all of the same type.

Jesus' term on earth came to its end and he went to his Lord. Later, his followers split into groups and factions: some made him a deity; some made him the son of God; others make God a trinity of three one of whom is Jesus. The pure concept of God's oneness preached by Jesus has, thus, been lost, as also his call on people to worship God alone, pure in their submission to Him.[4]

"*Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day.*" (Verse 65) Then the pagan Arabs disputed with the Prophet concerning Jesus, basing their argument on what these different factions fabricated and weaved of legends about him.

Waiting for the Last Hour

When the *sūrah* refers to wrongdoers, it includes those factions that disputed about Jesus together with the pagan Arabs who argued with the Prophet on the basis of what those factions perpetrated. It draws a long, spectacular scene showing what happens to them on the Day of Judgement and adds an image of what happens to the God-fearing who receive His favours in heaven:

> *What are they waiting for other than the Last Hour, which will come upon them all of a sudden and take them unawares? On that Day, friends will become enemies to one another, except for the God-fearing.*

3. The information given here about Jewish sects and the subsequent quotations are based on Al-Aqqād, 'Abbās Maḥmūd, *'Abqariyyat al-Masīḥ*, Cairo, (n.d.).

4. A more detailed discussion of this is given in *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, Vol. XIII, pp. 178–180.

desire. However, what comes over and above desire satisfaction is that it is all pleasant to the eye, adding beauty to gratification: "*They will be waited upon with trays and goblets of gold; and there will be found all that the souls may desire and the eyes may delight in.*" (Verse 71) Yet there is more to this blessed enjoyment: there is something greater and far more honourable. They are honoured by an address from on high: "*There you shall abide. This is the garden that shall be your own on account of what you used to do. You shall have there fruits in abundance, from which to eat.*" (Verses 71–73)

What fate awaits the evildoers whom we left a little while ago in dispute, blaming one another? "*The evildoers shall abide in the suffering of hell.*" (Verse 74) It is a permanent, hard and severe suffering that allows no reduction or respite. No ray of hope will ever appear nor any chance of deliverance. They endure it, lost in despair: "*It will not be lightened for them; they will remain in utter despair.*" (Verse 75) This is all their own doing. No one has wronged them: "*We never wronged them; it was they who have wronged themselves.*" (Verse 76)

An outcry is heard from afar. It is an outcry of utter distress, born in despair: "*They will cry, 'Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!'*" (Verse 77) It comes from down below, from behind the closed doors of hell. The evildoers are not appealing for help or salvation; they have already despaired of that. All they are asking for is that they should be allowed to perish, their misery end. That is all that they can hope for. When all that one can hope for is to perish, one must be in extreme distress. This cry certainly comes from long-suffering souls and bodies whose endurance has gone beyond all limits. Hence they cry out: "*Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!*" The answer they are given adds to their despair, caring little for what they feel: "*He will answer: 'You are here to stay.'*" (Verse 77) No deliverance, no hope, no death, no end; they are there to stay.

This distressing image is followed by an address to those who hate the truth and turn away from guidance. It portrays to all how singular their attitude is:

> *We have brought the truth to you, but most of you abhor the truth. If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our*

own. Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all. (Verses 78–80)

It is their abhorrence of the truth that prevented them from following it. It is not that they did not realize that it is the truth. Nor did they doubt the honesty and sincerity of the Prophet; they had long known him, acknowledging that he never told a lie. How could he, then, lie to God saying about Him what was false? In most cases, those who oppose the truth are not unaware that it is the truth; they simply hate it because it conflicts with their desires. They are too weak to resist their desires, but they can always attempt to suppress the truth and persecute its advocates. It is from this, their weakness, that they derive the audacity to stand against the truth.

Therefore, the Almighty who knows all their secrets and scheming warns them: "*If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our own. Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all.*" (Verses 79–80) Their persistent support of falsehood against the truth is countered by God's clear will to establish and strengthen the truth; and their wicked scheming under the cover of darkness is countered by God's knowledge of all secret whispering. When weak creatures stand against the Almighty, All-Knowing Creator, the outcome is a forgone conclusion.

In Heaven and on Earth

Now the Qur'ān directs the Prophet to say something to them and to leave them to face the destiny which has already been described to them:

Say: 'If the Lord of Grace had a son, I would be the first to worship him.' Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions. Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised. (Verses 81–83)

They alleged that the angels whom they worshipped were God's daughters. Had God had any offspring, the first one to know this and act on the basis of this knowledge was God's Prophet and messenger. He was close to Him and was quick to comply with His orders. He would have been the first to offer his respects to His offspring, had He had any as they alleged. He, however, worships none but God. This in itself is evidence confirming that their allegation has no basis. All glory belongs to God who is totally unlike what they allege. "*Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions.*" (Verse 82)

When we contemplate the heavens and the earth, looking at their systems and harmony, we feel the greatness and sublimity of the One who controls all this, referred to as, '*the Lord of the Throne*,' and we realize the absurdity of any such claim. By our nature we know that the Maker of the universe can have no similarity to creatures who procreate. Therefore, attributing sons and daughters to Him appears to be no more than idle talk and play, which deserve no answer. It only merits a stern warning of what happens on the Day of Resurrection, an image of which has already been given: "*Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised.*" (Verse 83)

The *sūrah* continues its glorification of God, the Creator, attributing to Him what is worthy of His Lordship of the heavens and the earth as well as the mighty throne:

> *It is He alone who is God in heaven and God on earth; He alone is the Wise, the All-Knowing. Blessed is He to whom sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them belongs, and with whom the knowledge of the Last Hour rests, and to whom you shall be brought back. Those whom they invoke beside Him have no power of intercession, unlike those who know the truth and bear witness to it.* (Verses 84–86)

This statement confirms the unity of Godhead throughout the universe, making it clear that no one shares this with God Almighty who does everything according to His infinite wisdom and perfect

knowledge. The Arabic word *tabārak*, translated here as 'blessed', carries connotations of greatness and exaltedness above all their perceptions. It is He who is '*the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all in between*'. He alone knows the timing of the Last Hour and to Him all creation returns. On that day, when all return to Him, none of those whom they allege as His offspring or partners will have the power of intercession for anyone. None can intercede with Him other than one who knows the truth and bears witness to it. A person who testifies to the truth will not intercede on behalf of any who ever stood in opposition to it.

The *sūrah* then confronts them with something that is ingrained in their nature and concerning which they have no doubt. That is, their Creator is God. How, then, can they associate partners with Him in their worship, and how can they expect that anyone will intercede on behalf of anyone who associated partners with Him: "*Yet if you ask them who created them they are sure to answer, 'God'. How is it, then, that they are so misled?*" (Verse 87) How can they ignore the truth testified to by their own nature? How can they allow their behaviour to be in conflict with its inevitable result?

As the *sūrah* comes to its close, it highlights the fact that the Prophet turns to his Lord complaining of their rejection of the truth and their disbelief: "*And [the Prophet] says: 'My Lord, these are people who will not believe.'*" (Verse 88) This is given in a special form that implies how keenly the Prophet felt this and how well God received it. The answer from on high is a directive to the Prophet to bear with them and not to care for their rejection. On the contrary, he should forbear and feel his heart content. To this is added an implicit warning to those determined opponents of the truth: "*Still, bear with them and say, 'Peace,' for in time they will come to know.*" (Verse 89) The time will come when everything is exposed and they will then know the dreadful fate that awaits them.